DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 440 899 SO 031 075

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TITLE	Teaching Current Events: Its Status in Social Studies Today.
PUB DATE	2000-04-00
NOTE	40p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Current Events; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; National Surveys; Questionnaires; *Social Studies; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Surveys
IDENTIFIERS	National Council for the Social Studies

ABSTRACT

A study addressed specific topics related to the teaching of current events through a teacher survey asking the more general question: How do social studies teachers who are members of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) teach current events in their classrooms? Questionnaires were mailed to a random, national sample of 598 members of NCSS and divided among those who indicated specific interests in elementary, middle school, or high school on their membership applications or renewals. Recent questionnaires on civic education were examined by the researchers, and a two-page survey of selected response and short answer questions asking about instruction, assessment, and evaluation strategies teachers used when teaching current events and teacher perceptions of student responses was constructed for the study. Respondents were likely to be committed to including current events in their social studies instruction. Most teachers responded that they linked current events to the topical emphasis of their current social studies instructional units by using current events to provide contemporary examples of abstract historical, social, economic, and political concepts or to illustrate the continuity of social issues over time and across cultures. A smaller group focused their current events teaching by stressing inquiry as a process and using the skills of identification of facts to recognize bias, points of view, perspectives, and exaggeration in their teaching of current events. The majority viewed teaching current events as integral to their professional obligation. (Contains 8 recommendations, 14 tables of data, 22 references, and a sample survey.) (BT)

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TEACHING CURRENT EVENTS: ITS STATUS IN SOCIAL STUDIES TODAY

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SO 031 075

Paper Presented at the Annual Conferences of the
American Educational Research Association
New Orleans
April 2000

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TEACHING CURRENT EVENTS: ITS STATUS IN SOCIAL STUDIES TODAY

Current events provide authentic learning experiences for students at all grade levels. Unfolding over time the study of current events requires that both students and teachers give special attention to the tentative nature of information as it becomes available from one or more resources and withhold conclusions and decisions until multiple sources and perspectives are examined. In studying current events students are required to use a range of cognitive, affective, research, critical thinking, and communication skills.

Statement of problem:

Confronting controversial issues, many of which are present in current events topics, has long been an essential goal in social studies instruction. "The foremost aim of instruction in high-school social studies is to help students examine reflectively issues in the closed areas of American culture" (Hunt & Metcalf, 1955, 223). They described the current events movement as having the ability to introduce fresh content into the curriculum, but warned that there might be a tendency to focus on the trivial or emphasize reporting of news rather than the more difficult analysis and interpretation needed to link current events to the curriculum. Hunt and Metcalf advocated that every social studies teacher read on a regular basis a quality newspaper with a national circulation, and that teachers should try to

make a quality newspaper available to their students. Today's social studies methods textbooks for all grade levels describe multiple ways to approach the teaching of current events and identify skills students need for obtaining and interpreting information about current events (Dynnesson & Gross 1999; Martorella, 1996; Laughlin & Hartoonian, 1995; Sunal and Haas, 1993).

However, a civics curriculum largely void of controversial issues, conflict and dissent continues to dominate instruction (Avery, et.al., 1996; Houser, 1995; Thornton and Houser, 1994; Engle and Ochoa, 1988). While many social studies classes in the United States included current events, the practices and focus remain largely a teacher's personal choice or a discussion of a significant event.

Over the years research data regarding the teaching of current events have relied mostly on self reported responses from students or teachers on their use of teaching strategies that openly discuss contemporary issues or current events. Hahn's (1998) review of research seems to confirm that when students reported frequently discussing controversial issues, when they perceived that several sides of issues are presented and discussed, and they are comfortable in expressing their ideas in the classroom then there is a greater potential for fostering later civic participation than when such traits are missing from the classroom. However, behaviors and

perspectives of the wider culture also mediate the effects of classroom climate.

While the voting patterns of various groups have been recorded, reported, publicized, and examined by political scientists and politicians, little is known about the impact of social studies classes and civics classes on voting. At best school has been called a contributing variable. Other variables such as family and media have been identified as being more powerful in bringing about an interest in political power and exercising that power (Miller and Kimmel, 1998). Hahn (1996) reported that student evaluations in both national and international testing have resulted in mixed findings about the inclusion of civic discussions and at best suggested small correlations of low impact for classroom learning. Qualitative researchers such as Bickmore (1993) report that many students do not speak up or initiate discussion in a classroom and note that as many as one third to two thirds of the students in a classroom are invisible during discussion. On the other hand Niemi and Junn (1998) in an analysis of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 1988 Civic Assessment were able to show that students who reported regularly experiencing the discussion of current events in civics classes performed significantly better on the 1988 Civic Assessment.

Recently reported findings from a 1999 survey of just over 1000 youth ages 15 -24 which incorporated focus group discussions at six locations throughout the United States, sponsored by the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS), reported that these youth were critical of the high school government classes because of their failure to do a good job teaching students about current events and the democratic process of voting including how to secure information about political candidates. Focus group members described the government classes as largely disconnected from current events. This focus group research recommended that elementary and middle schools should have a more pronounced role in teaching students about politics, political behavior, and political activities. Clearly the formal education of those who participated in the survey had not convinced the youth of the importance of newspapers and television news as a means for learning about political and current events. They noted that 57% percent of the responders indicted paying only some or very little attention to newspaper and television coverage of political and government issues with 41% indicating they either never or rarely read a newspaper (NASS,1999).

A recent study on teaching about the controversial impeachment of President William Jefferson Clinton reported that those teachers who decided to teach about issues related to the

impeachment of President Clinton did so by incorporating them into topics usually taught in the school curriculum or as a part of their daily discussion of current events. In describing the content focus teachers indicated that they taught about the constitutional process, legal terms, interpretations of the law, and the history of impeachment. Teachers who decided not to teach about the impeachment considered it not to be relevant to the regular curriculum content of the courses or to the particular time in the school year. A few middle school teachers stated they thought the topic was inappropriate for the age and maturity level of their students (Haas and Laughlin,1999).

Social studies has long advocated the use of controversial and current events as important for teaching democratic values and participation with some advocates suggesting that the curriculum and unit studies be centered around the examination of controversial and current events (Hunt & Metcalf, 1955; Oliver & Shaver, 1966; Engle & Ochoa, 1988). Students of fourth and eighth grade teachers who reported using books, newspapers and magazines with their students weekly or once or twice a month scored significantly better on the 1998 NAEP Civics test than those who reported never or hardly ever using such resources (U. S. Department of Education, 1999). While there has been much advocacy and some sample materials produced, tested, and published; today important

questions centering on how teachers approach the teaching of current events; how they encourage students to evaluate facts, opinions and values; why they decide to teach or not teach a current event; and how learning from current events is assessed remain largely unknown. This study addressed these specific topics related to the teaching of currents events through a survey asking the more general question: How do social studies teacher who are members of the National Council for the Social Studies teach current events in their social studies classes?

Sample:

Questionnaires were mailed to a random, national sample of 598 members of NCSS divided among those who indicated specific interests in elementary, middle school, or high school on their membership applications or renewal forms. Because replies of individual teachers were desired, the address list was first examined and labels that identified a principal or resource center teacher were excluded from potential use. Next a sample from all of the states represented on the labels with what appeared to be home addresses was selected for inclusion. A second set of labels randomly selected from the remaining labels which gave school addresses was mailed about a week later. No follow up mailings were conducted. Teachers were asked that if they were no longer teaching social studies to pass the questionnaire on to another

teacher whom they believed would be able to answer the questionnaire and return it by the requested deadline. Table 1 shows the distribution of questionnaires mailed.

Table 1

Sample Characteristics

Characteristic	Elementary Teachers	Middle School Teachers	High School Teachers	Total
Questionnaires Mailed	175	200	223	598
Questionnaires Returned	35	65	76	187
Rate of Return	20%	32.5%	34%	31%

Survey Instrument:

Recent questionnaires on civic education were examined by the authors and a two page survey of selected response and short answer questions asking about instruction, assessment, and evaluation strategies teacher's used when teaching current events and teacher perceptions of student responses was constructed for the study. Teachers were also asked for their knowledge of state and local curriculum guidelines or policies related to teaching current events. Questionnaire used in the study is in Appendix A.

Findings:

The overall return rate for the single mailing was 31%. As Table 1 illustrates the rate of return varied directly with the grade level

taught by the teachers. The elementary return rate was only 20% while the middle school and high school teachers responded at rates of 32.5% and 34%. Given the fact that social studies is not always assessed through standardized tests in the lower grades, and the potentially controversial nature of some of the content associated with current events the variance in return rates was not surprising. Given that all of the teachers contacted were members of the National Council for the Social Studies, the rather low return rate was disappointing. Since no envelopes were returned as "not deliverable," teachers who did not return the questionnaire may not teach current events or they may simply elected not to respond to the questionnaire.

Seventy-eight percent of the responding teachers had eleven or more years of teaching experience. Table 2 provides the distribution of years of teaching by grade level. The largest number of respondents at each level have taught between 21 and 30 years and by many criteria would be considered to be "experienced" and "veteran" teachers who have a substantive background or content knowledge. For the purpose of this study elementary teachers were defined as those teaching K-4, middle school as grades 5-8, and high school as 9-12.

Table 2

Years of Teaching by Grade Level

Years of Teaching	Elementary Teachers	Middle School Teachers	High School Teachers
0-10	8	15	17
11-20	8	10	19
21-30	13	30	21
31-40	5	9	18
41-50	0	1	0
No data	1	0	1
Total	35	65	76
Range of Years	3 - 35	2 - 41	2 - 40

Additionally, the report card on the 1998 NAEP Civics test indicated that students whose teachers with three of more years of teaching experience made higher scores. Given their membership in the professional organization for social studies and their years of experiences the likelihood of these teachers being proficient teachers of current events was high. As indicated in Table 3 all of the high school teachers included current events in their teaching of social studies. Only one elementary teacher and seven middle school teachers indicated not teaching current events. The elementary teachers indicated that it was the often violent nature of news that prompted her/his decision not to include current events while the middle school teachers most frequently cited a lack of time because of the curriculum of the state or district "now dictated standards...squeezed out [time for] current events." Several middle

school teachers who responded initially that they did not include current events in teaching social studies later indicated that they occasionally linked a current event to a topic being studied, dealt superficially with important events as they developed, and relied on watching and discussing Channel 1 television program offerings at another time during the day rather than incorporating the teaching of current events into the social studies curriculum.

Table 3

Teachers Using Current Events in Teaching Social Studies

Choices	Elementary	Middle	High School	Total
Yes	35	59	76	170
No	1	7	0	8

When asked which term indicated their belief in the importance of current events in social studies education, no teacher indicated that current events was " not important" while 95% responded the teaching of current events as being "important" or "essential." As illustrated by Table 4 teachers at the high school level were more likely to consider current events as "essential." Both middle school and high school teachers considered current events to be an essential component of social studies education. Additionally, 65% of the teachers from all grade levels perceived that students had greater interest in current events than other class activities.

Table 4

Teacher Belief in Importance Teaching Current Events is to Social Studies Education

Grade Level	Essential	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Elementary	9	22	3	0
Middle	38	22	4	0
High School	52	21	2	0

Teachers recognized that students' interest varied among individuals, but 65% perceived their students as interested or very interested in studying current events. Table 5 also indicated that very few teachers perceived a lack of interest in current events among their students.

Table 5
Teacher Perception of Students Responses to Current Events

Choices	Elementary Teachers	Middle School Teachers	High School Teachers
Most very interested	14 *41%*	9 *13%*	13 *17%*
Interested	9 *26%*	27 *39%*	38 *49%*
Interest similar other activities	6 *18%*	20 *29%*	10 *13%*
Few not interested	3 *9%*	8 *11%*	12 *16%*
Most not interested	2 *6%*	6 *9%*	4 *5%*

Teachers provided a variety of answers concerning the frequency of their use of current events. As shown in Table 6 most

of the teachers address current events at least weekly with very few indicating a monthly or bi-monthly use. Evidently a number of teachers at each grade level will deviate from a regular instructional pattern, course content, or class activities and address a current event "when something important happens." It is interesting to note that this response was indicated by more teachers at the middle school level.

Table 6
Frequency of Teaching Current Events in Social Studies

Grade Level	Daily	Several Times Per Week	Weekly	Twice Monthly	Monthly	When an important event
Ele. School	1	6	16	0	3	10
Middle School	10	10	27	2	2	23
High School	21	20	24	1	0	10

Even though almost all of the teachers used current events in their teaching of social studies, their suggested rationales for including current events in their teaching of social studies varied greatly both within a grade level and between grade levels. Only two teachers indicated that current events as stand alone topics were worthy to be the content focus of a unit of study. Instead, current events were linked to updating and making the social studies curriculum easier to understand or relevant to the lives of students today. Since the content of most of the teachers' classes focused on

history, geography, and government it was not surprising that the largest number of teachers linked current events to the study of history. Teachers at all three instructional levels wrote such statements which included phrases such as the following in relation to the teaching of current events:

"historic precedence,"

"cause and effect,"

"past affects present and present affects the future,"

"current events become history,"

"teacher the past through present,"

"related to history," and

"make current [timely] issues in social studies"

Globalizing the curriculum and making students aware of other nations were other commonly cited rationales for current events in social studies. Phrases in teacher rationales that were classified as part of this global response include:

" teaches global perspectives,"

"discuss what is going on in the world,"

"reflect life in areas we are studying,"

"update the geography textbook,"

"become aware of the world,"

"preparation for citizenship of U. S. and world," and

"we are a global society"

Several teachers saw current events as a part of social studies curriculum and integral to social studies either to prepare students to become informed citizens, participate in government, or to practice thinking skills, and become aware of multiple views.

Teachers were asked to indicate which social studies skills the expected students to learn through the teaching of current events. Eight skills were suggested on the questionnaire along with an opportunity to provide data related to additional skills. Table 7 indicates teachers viewed their current events as an opportunity to stress skill use. Most of the teachers at all grade levels indicated that gathering information, drawing conclusions, and defining problems were more frequently selected than were identifying assumptions, summarizing viewpoints, and communicating ideas. Identifying bias was selected by about 50% of the elementary teachers while more than 90% of the high school teachers indicated this is a skill they expected students learn and apply through current events. This large difference maybe reflect a greater willingness of high school teachers to deal with the more controversial issues related to current events. Among the other responses from elementary teachers were: predict consequences, compare and contrast opinions, develop a personal viewpoint, cause and effect, and sequencing. New suggestions made by middle school teachers included the following of events as they happen and identifying sources of information

related to the topic or event. High school teachers added the skill of developing a sense of historical time.

Table 7
Social Studies Skills Teachers Expect to be Learned through Current Events

Choices	Elementary Teachers	Middle School Teachers	High School Teachers
Gather information	29	52	64
Analyze statements	23	46	62
Identify bias	18	40	69
Defining problems	30	46	60
Identify assumptions	8	25	37
Summarize viewpoints	19	46	54
Drawing conclusions	28	47	68
Communicating ideas	12	31	42
Other (specify)	6	7	7

The important attitudes and values written as short answer replies by the teachers tended to repeat the ideas expressed in the rationales for teaching current events. The many individual teacher comments could be categorized as developing empathy, reducing ethnocentric thought, building global awareness, recognizing interdependence, appreciating others and their views, encouraging tolerance, and the need and importance of being an informed active citizen.

Teachers and students use a large variety of resources when studying current events. Even with the great increase in use of the Internet, the newspaper was identified as being used most frequently by teachers at all grade levels. This includes both the use of local newspapers and larger urban papers. The second most popular source at all grade levels was television. A greater percentage of elementary teachers identify the various news publications for students such as: SCHOLASTIC, TIME FOR KIDS, WEEKLY READER, and NIE NEWS DAY than teachers at other grade levels. Middle school teachers reported the greatest use of news magazines and most frequently identified specific youth publications from Scholastic Publishers. Among the middle school teachers only 7 mentioned Channel 1 and at the high school level only 10 teachers identified Channel 1 as a source of information. At the high school level adult news magazines especially NEWSWEEK, TIME, and U. S. NEWS AND WORLD REPORT were identified by almost as many teachers as those who identified newspapers as a teaching resource. Use of the Internet was more prevalent among the high school responders and identified about as often as those who identified the television as a resource for current events. The actual percent making such responses was slightly less than 50%. However, when teachers were provided with a selected listing of possible activities and asked to respond to that list (shown in Table

8), 37%, 43% and 56% indicated that they used resources obtained from the Internet to prepare current events lessons.

Table 8

Frequency of Use Selected Activities

Activity	Elementary Teachers	Middle School Teachers	High School Teachers
Student selected oral summaries	21	34	48
Regularly discuss social issues	27	44	65
Regular reports on set topics (Africa, crime)	3	5	9
Long term report on going current events	0	5	25
Use commercial program magazine, paper, or TV	28	47	58
Teacher develops unit initiated by event	10	14	31
Use internet resources current event lessons	13	28	43
Always include range of current events in class	19	42	52

Regular discussions of social issues and the use of commercial resources as sources of information concerning current events were identified most frequently by the teachers. Students were much more likely select their own topics and orally present a report to the class. Few of the teachers selected the option of assigning students a pre-selected topic for individual or group reporting over a period of time. Clearly long term reports and or projects were considered an activity for older students. More than half of the teachers indicated that they always included a range of

current events in their classes. They often tried to relate current events to the social studies topics currently being studied. At each grade level some teachers indicated that they developed units of study related to a current event issue. In specifying the topics of such units the most frequent replies were based on topics that remained major stories in the national or international news for a longer period of time: Natural disasters, El Niño, Y2K, elections, impeachment, and Middle East. Kosovo was the most frequently mentioned topic for an instructional unit by both middle school and high school teachers. A few teachers indicated that their instructional units were centered around local or state issues.

Since current events are frequently controversial, several questions inquired specifically about the teaching of controversial issues by asking if and how teachers addressed such issues. Teacher responses recorded in Table 9 noted that the inclusion of controversial topics increased in direct relationship to an increase in grade level. About one third of the middle school and two-thirds of the high school teachers indicated that controversial topics were an integral part of their teaching about current events. Only about 20% of the elementary teachers indicated doing so. Free standing comments from several elementary teachers indicated specifically that controversial topics were avoided. A few teachers at all grade levels indicated that they rarely taught events that were

controversial. Again it was the elementary teachers who were more likely to select this response. In fact more elementary teachers indicated that they rarely taught controversial events than indicated that they included them as an integral part of their current event teaching. Considerably more teachers indicated that they followed the practice of dealing only with controversial current events if such a discussion was initiated by the students. Responses such as these raise further concerns about the nature of the constraints that inhibit the teaching of current events and controversial issues.

Table 9

Controversial Issues in Current Events

Activity	Elementary Teachers	Middle School Teachers	High School Teachers
Rarely teach controversial events	9	3	3
System gives no support if parents complain topic	6	6	6
Controversial topics integral my current event	8	25	50
Controversial events only students initiated	19	12	7

Only six teachers at each grade level (for a total of 18 teachers) indicated their school system would not support them if parents complained about the topic being studied. It is interesting to note, as shown in Table 10, that most of the teachers at all grade

levels indicated that to their knowledge their school system did not have a policy concerning teaching current events. At the elementary level teachers indicated that current events are a part of the district standards or curriculum. The only comment provided by one respondent that could be interpreted as a warning against the use of current events was, "We are limited on what we can say about AIDS." Nine of the middle school teachers who wrote comments on current event policies indicated that the policy in their school was that current events were to be included in their curriculum and teaching. One teacher indicated that her/his school system mandated the use of Channel 1's daily television news programs for students. Only two middle school teachers mentioned a policy related to teaching controversial issues. One reported that there was a policy but offered no specific details, and another indicated, "We avoid controversy at all cost." Among the high school teachers' explanations were several indications that current events were expected to be in all social studies classes and there were some courses offered as electives or advanced studies and called contemporary issues or other similar titles.

Table 10
School Systems with Policies on Current Events

Policies	Elementary Teachers	Middle School Teachers	High School Teachers
Yes	8	13	16
No	26	45	57

Large numbers of teachers responded that they either did not know if their state standards addressed current events and many wrote "no" or "not directly" on the questionnaire. In some instances different teachers from the same state replied "yes" while others responded "no" to this question. Table 11 provided the response choices but many teachers added words such as "indirectly" or "implied" while others indicated that the state standards were still in the development process or not yet published and so they were uncertain about their state's standards in relation to the teaching of current events.

Table 11

Current Events Addressed in State Standards

Response	Elementary Teachers	Middle School Teachers	High School Teachers
Yes	16	23	41
No	11	10	16
Don't know	6	24	17

When describing their greatest problem in teaching current events, the scarcity of time and the mandate to include content drawn from state and local curriculum guidelines or standards for their grade level were reported as the greatest problems all teachers faced concerning teaching current events (see Table 12). At the elementary level more teachers reported that they did not have time

as the requirements of the remainder of the social studies and other curriculum areas were extensive. Several teachers identified other significant problems related directly to the age and maturity level of their students who were beginning to learn about current events. A few indicated that part of their responsibility is to move students past their limited view of the world into a wider view of the world and the people in the global community.

Some teachers indicated there is a shortage of materials appropriate for the young learner and that if students had current event resources in their homes they often lacked the habit of using such resources and/or references. Elementary teachers also made specific references to the "controversial or sensitive nature of the topics," "lack of understanding of background concepts in knowledge," "being misquoted/ misunderstood," and "parent negative reactions" as reasons for their not teaching current events.

Middle school teachers identified similar problems related to the nature and complexity of the events. They also added comments such as students did not see the relevance of current events to their lives, lacked interest in things outside their personal situations, and the inability of some students to seek news worthy topics rather than sensationalism for current events discussions.

Among the high school teachers the major problem remained the lack of time, and the already crowded curriculum. They also

noted that many students worked and did not have the time to follow news and gain the necessary background information even if appropriate resources were available. A number of teachers at the high school level indicated the short amount of time available for them to prepare materials for student use in class because of the rapid changes in on going events and the complex nature of the issue.

Table 12

Greatest Problems in Teaching Current Events

Problem	Elementary Teachers	Middle School Teachers	High School Teachers
Time constraints	10	33	27
Controversial topics	5	6	8
Lack prior knowledge	4	5	11
Lack of materials	4	7	7
Lack of student interest	0	7	2

In terms of grading current events more than two-thirds of the middle school and high school teachers indicated that they awarded a specific number of points toward the total grade for their current events assignments and discussions while less than one-third of the elementary teachers did so. Elementary teachers assessed current events through discussions and quizzes and the written responses on work sheets. The descriptions of middle school teachers grading

techniques were grouped into four categories: Periodic written or oral reports, discussions, tests and quizzes, and extra credit which often times were additional questions on tests. High school teachers most frequently described their assessment techniques through such terms as: related assignments (e.g., poster, journal, portfolios), exams, extra credit, written or oral summaries, discussion, and essays. Few performance authentic assessment and evaluation strategies were suggested by the teachers. Based on the comments in the existing data reported in this study, it appears that rubrics and rapid scoring procedures for classroom discussions are not as yet being utilized.

Table 13

Award Points Toward Grade for Current Events

Response	Elementary Teachers	Middle School Teachers	High School Teachers
Yes	9	43	58
No	24	20	17
Sometimes	1	0	0

About half of these teachers (see Table 14) who regularly used the media in their classrooms had personal experience in being interviewed by the media. Teachers were usually interviewed more

than one time by the local news media. Often they were interviewed about activities they were doing with their students, recognition of their class or individual student accomplishments, and because they personally had won recognition or received opportunity for study or travel. Several were interviewed in conjunction with positions as leaders in local teacher organization or union. Several teachers indicated that the local press sought information from them. None of the teachers indicated personally seeking out or making contact with the media. Only a couple of teachers indicated that they were asked to comment on a national issue or event.

Table 14

Teachers Interviewed by Media

Response	Elementary Teachers	Middle School Teachers	High School Teachers
Yes	18	27	36
No	18	38	38

Discussion:

Teachers who responded to this survey are more likely to be committed to including current events in their social studies instruction. The authors hypothesize that the answers given by this

small sample represents fairly well the typical teaching of current events in the schools in the United States. Additionally, other recently reported findings from surveys and interviews have tended to report responses similar to those given by the respondents in these particular study (Wilson, Sunal, Haas, & Laughlin, 1999; Haas & Laughlin, 2000).

In this study almost all of the teachers indicated that they included current events in their instruction on at least a weekly basis with many indicating a greater frequency or even daily consideration of current events. Others indicated addressing "important current events" when they happened.

Most teachers responded that they linked current events to the topical emphasis of their current social studies instructional units by using current events to provide contemporary examples of abstract historical, social, economic, and political concepts or to illustrate the continuity of social issues over time and across cultures. A smaller group of teachers focused their current event teaching by stressing inquiry as a process and using the skills of identification of facts by recognizing bias, point of view, perspectives, and exaggeration in their teaching of current events. The majority of teachers viewed teaching current events, including those that were controversial, as integral to their professional obligation of educating and socializing students in the democratic traditions. A few teachers, mostly at the

elementary and middle school levels indicated that while they did not initiate the study of controversial topics, they would address those issues/topics that were initiated by the students. Teachers indicated that by studying current events students learn such values as respect for a diversity of opinions, the need to be informed citizens, recognition of the need to protect the rights of all, recognition of globalism and interdependence, and building empathy for others. In an earlier study on a very controversial current event related to the impeachment of President Clinton, the national sample of social studies teachers responded in very similar ways concerning the teaching of current event/controversial issues in their classes (Haas and Laughlin, 2000).

It would appear that most teachers and school administrators see the teaching of current events as a gathering of current information and a way to explain abstract concepts. There was little evidence of teachers using a particular current event as the basis for a critical inquiry into an issue that would last for several days. While such an approach to the study of social studies has long been advocated and is seeing some re-emergence as issue-centered education, the approach has been criticized as being too process oriented and one that does not assure that all students learn a consistent core of knowledge. It has also been criticized by

teachers for its reliance on data not readily available to teachers and their students.

The current emphasis in the schools for a standards-based curriculum focused on content in history, geography, government, and economics encourages teachers to use current events as a means to support the learning of core knowledge in these disciplines and makes it very difficult to find the time or resources for the development of other units and projects. This at a time when information and opinions are more available to larger numbers of teachers and students through the Internet. It would appear that there may be an increase in these types of studies in classes or the appearance of longer and more varied types of class presentations.

Past efforts on dealing with controversial and current issues by social studies teachers have not often been wide spread. This is especially true with an emphasis on national standards and the concern for high test scores on state mandated tests based upon their standards. Today teachers at all grade levels identify the scarcity of time for instruction in current events. The present mode of presentation is a logical one for teachers to apply when faced with the scarcity of time. It is also a safer approach. Since student oral or written reports are the main mode of student presentation often there is little time to question facts and opinions or to investigate alternatives and consequences which might lead to controversies.

Hahn (1999) in summarizing the instructional activities in civics classes described by focus groups for The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) study of civics in the United State indicated, that while there is great variation between classes and grade levels, most students periodically have discussions of a current issue. It is interesting to note that apparently few school systems had written policies on the teaching of current events. It would appear that the school administrators expect current events to be used to support the knowledge base of the curriculum and rely on the professional judgment of the teachers on the selection of content and the use of current events.

Given the responses which described the current event assignments and ways in which grades, when given, were assigned, the researchers suspect that most of the current event teaching seeks to avoid controversies. If teachers were confronting current events as a way of developing long term goals related to developing critical thinking and promoting problem solving, they would be more likely to assess current events with something more than extra credit points or short answer questions on their tests or through publisher prepared quizzes and tests by current event publishers. All of this leads the researchers to suspect that if controversies are addressed in current event instruction, they are very carefully addressed by teachers and most probably only for a short period of time that tend

to encourage students to think more reflectively about the topic and engage in additional research as their own line of inquiry.

The authenticity of studying about current events should provide a potential for its being a stimulant to the use of alternative means of assessments that look for the real life use of skills and knowledge by students. It would seem to be logical to suspect, that given the political nature of the public schools, that approaches to current events that stir controversies would have resulted in specific school board policies which all social studies teachers would know well.

Carol Hahn (1996 a) identified three important dimensions for issue-centered social studies from empirical studies as: controversial content; pedagogical strategies which engage learners in advocating and evaluating controversial positions; and a democratic classroom climate which supports open inquiry and discussion. Unfortunately this current study failed to ask about the use of specific teaching strategies such as debates, simulations, inquiry projects, and open discussions. Therefore, this study could not determine if the teachers were using content and pedagogy to confront or gloss over controversies.

Current research suggests that school experience is only one of the factors that create an interest in political efficacy and citizens' activities. The past two administrations of the National Assessment of

Educational Progress (NAEP) test in civics have reported that Blacks, Hispanics, and Native American students have performed significantly lower than have Caucasian students. Since these tests are largely based upon test items from the social science content areas and are therefore likely to be measures of a " standards based curriculum," researchers might ask if a standards based curriculum will result in lower NAEP scores among these ethnic minority groups in the future.

Given the responses teachers provided concerning current events and state and local standards or goals another important task is to investigate the actual presence or absence of current events expectations in the standards. Are current events a potential victim of the standards movement?

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Given the responses of the teachers, based on this study the following are conclusions and recommendations.

1. The study of current events may be more important to teachers since many of the topics/issues were more adult oriented rather than reflecting concerns relevant to students.
2. The teaching of current events is important to help develop informed citizens and needs to be extended to the larger educational community and beyond.

3. There is an urgent need to investigate the constraints impacting teaching current events and the often complicated and controversial nature of the event.

4. Social studies teachers and other educators should lead the way to establish or revise written policies for school systems related to the teaching of controversial issues and current events as needed.

5. More staff development opportunities for teachers on using local, national, and international current events as the basis for social studies instructional units and community participation projects need to be provided. it is incumbent upon local boards of education to provide the resources for such staff development programs.

6. The development of ways to assess, recognize students participation, and evaluate students learning through current events learning requires additional consideration.

7. Research in the form of additional interviews and observations of teachers and students in classrooms concerned with their participation, perceptions, and experiences studying current events should be expanded.

8. Classroom research designed to identify effective instructional units and teaching procedures to help students attain social studies understandings, skills, express personal convictions, and attitudes should be initiated through the use of traditional and action research. These results should be distributed widely.

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Appendix A: Survey on teaching current events in social studies

Years of teaching _____ Currently teaching grade _____ Content emphasis_____

Circle the responses that best describe your responses:

1. Do you use current events in your teaching of social studies? Yes No

If yes, please state a rationale for your decision to teach current events_____

_____

_____

If no, please explain the reason(s) for your decision not to teach current events

_____

_____

_____

2. How frequently do you teach current events in social studies?

daily several days per week weekly less than once per week monthly

3. How important do you believe teaching current events is to social studies education?

essential important somewhat important not important

4. Circle important social studies skills you expect students to learn through your teaching of current events? gather information analyze statements identify bias define problems identify assumptions summarize viewpoints draw conclusions communicate findings

Other(s) specify _____

5. What important attitudes/values do students learn through your use of current events?_____

_____

_____

over over over over Thank you for your participation

6. Have you as a teacher or teacher of social studies ever been interviewed by the media?

No Yes Explain _____

_____

7. What current event resources do you and your students use? _____

_____

8. Are current events addressed in your state standards?

Yes No Don't know State name _____

9. To your knowledge does your school system have a policy concerning teaching current events? No Yes please explain

_____

10. What do you see as the short coming or greatest problem of teaching current events in your class(es)?

_____

_____

11. How do you perceive student responses to current events?

most very interested interested interest similar to other activities

few are not interested most are not interested

12. Do you provide points toward a student's grade for studying current events? Yes No

13. Please describe how you assess student learning in current events and/or provide points toward grade.

_____

_____

_____

over over over over Thank you for your participation.